

City of New Orleans

The Mayor's Criminal
Justice Coordinating Council

PRELIMINARY IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE STUDENT ACTION CENTER

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THE STUDENT ACTION CENTER
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Prepared by
The Mayor's Criminal Justice
Coordinating Council

July, 1979

Frank R. Serpas, Jr., Executive Director
Gilbert D. Litton, Jr., Director of Evaluation
Jack L. Ashcraft, Evaluator

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MAYOR'S CRIMINAL JUSTICE COORDINATING COUNCIL
PRELIMINARY IMPACT EVALUATION

Project: Student Action Center Program

Project Numbers: 76-J9-9.1-0407; 79-J9-J.3-0063

Subgrantee: Orleans Parish School Board

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Prepared By: Jack L. Ashcraft

Evaluation Assistance: Ms. Terese Honore
Student Intern

<u>Cumulative Grant Award:</u>	SLEPA	\$121,125.00
	Subgrantee	13,458.00
	Total	<u>\$134,583.00</u>

Project Personnel: Dr. Sara Foulks, Project Director
Ms. Debra Horton, Operating Director

Authorized Official: Dr. Gene Geisert, Superintendent
Orleans Parish School Board

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Truancy, a major problem among juveniles in Orleans Parish, is rising and is also considered by many as an explanation for much juvenile crime. Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, the Orleans Parish School Board implemented the Student Action Center as an experimental program providing counseling, tutoring, and referral services to combat truancy in two Central City schools.

This initial impact evaluation assesses the program's effectiveness in attaining its two primary goals—reduction of truancy and reduction of arrest recidivism. The measure used to assess truancy reduction indicated an average reduction of approximately 49%, very near the 50% goal anticipated in the grant application. However, the reduction of arrest recidivism was minimal, with the average change in number of arrests being 16.4% less after entrance into the program. This falls far short of the goal of 50% reduction as specified in the grant. Although there are qualifications to each of these measures, it might, nevertheless, be concluded that the Student Action Center is successfully impacting truancy. However, the impact on arrest recidivism seems negligible.

It is recommended that the Center increase the number of program participants; that the term truancy be operationally defined by the Center (or the Orleans Parish School Board) and that appropriate records be maintained to measure it;

and, that the final impact evaluation test the assumption that reduced truancy leads to reduced arrest recidivism.

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I. Introduction

Truancy, which may be defined as excessive absenteeism from school by a student without proper authorization from parents or school officials, is currently rising in the Orleans Parish Public Schools, with the incidence of truancy especially acute at the middle and junior high school levels.¹ Coincidentally, authorities in both the educational and juvenile justice systems tend to agree that the rise of juvenile crime is also correlated with high truancy rates. Thus, the effects of truancy have pervasive implications for both the individual truant and the community at large.

Recognizing the seriousness of the truancy problem in the schools and its negative consequences, the Orleans Parish School Board developed and implemented the Student Action Center Program as an attempt to reduce truancy in the schools and, therefore, juvenile crime. This program, funded through JJDP Grant #76-9.1-0407, is experimental and provides counseling and tutoring services to combat the increasing problem of truancy in two Orleans Parish schools. Because truancy is particularly severe in the middle and junior high school levels, the program serves James Derham Middle and Carter G. Woodson Junior High Schools which are located in the Central City Area where truancy and juvenile crime rates are high. Essentially, the program is designed to gain insight into the root causes of individual truant behavior and render

¹Orleans Parish School Board; "Student Action Center Program;" Application for Subgrant, 79-Jp-J.3-0063; October, 1978; P.6-2.

appropriate intervention remedies aimed at reducing or eliminating that behavior for 150 students per year.

JJDP grants totaling \$121,125.00 enabled the Student Action Center Program to operate between September 1, 1977, and May 31, 1979. This initial impact evaluation will examine the effectiveness of the program in meeting its two primary goals--the reduction of truancy and arrest recidivism.

Previously, a process evaluation² assessed the implementation of the Student Action Center Program. This report specified the goals and objectives and also provided a detailed operational description of the program. That report recommended, among other things, that the Center should increase the intake level; should complete and document school attendance data; and, should work toward increased parent involvement and community support.

²Mayor's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, Process Evaluation of the Student Action Center Program, November, 1978.

II. Program Description

The Student Action Center Program is designed to reduce truancy in two Orleans Parish schools. Simultaneously, a decrease in individual delinquent activities was anticipated. Located at 2608 Washington Avenue in the Magnolia Housing Project, the program provides counseling, tutoring, and referral services to students from Derham Middle and Woodson Junior High Schools. That location, in close proximity to the two schools, permits easy access to program services for participants.

The program is structured to serve approximately seventy-five identified truants from each of the two schools per year. Services provided by social workers and para-professionals include identification of truants and the causes of truant behavior, individual and/or group counseling, parent counseling, supportive therapy, tutorial services, referrals to appropriate agencies, and specially structured support programs after the truant returns to the classroom. While the majority of students are referred by teachers from the two schools, other referrals are accepted from the Orleans Parish School Board's Department of School Social Work Services, the New Orleans Police Department Juvenile Division, the Orleans Parish Juvenile Court, the Probation Department, parents, and community residents.

All students accepted into the program undergo a formal intake procedure and an initial contact is made with the

student's parents. The student is then assigned a social worker and a para-professional who provide regularly scheduled counseling and tutoring sessions. Once relevant behavior problems have been identified, a plan is developed by the staff which has been tailored to meet the needs of the individual.

Following the intake process, a recommendation is made by the staff either to immediately return the student to school and supplement his/her activities with a mix of supportive services or to refer the student to some other appropriate school program capable of meeting his/her needs. Students not returned to the regular classroom participate in academic classes and counseling sessions provided by the program.

When a student is perceived as ready to return to the regular classroom, he/she advances to the school re-entry component of the program consisting of an orientation period of one to five days. This orientation period is designed to explain to the returning student what is expected of him/her and to minimize any problems which may be encountered during the re-entry phase. A "contact room" has been established at both Derham and Woodson schools in which orientation sessions are conducted and where students may discuss any problems involved in re-entry. During the orientation period the student also prepares a contract outlining long and short term

goals to be accomplished. After re-entry and when the student has demonstrated sufficient progress and success, recommendations are made by the staff that he/she be terminated from the program.

The Center established an advisory committee which included parents, community leaders, and professional educators and social workers. This group has met regularly since the beginning of 1979. Also, there were monthly workshops with parents. Thus, these efforts served to increase parent involvement and community support, and reflect the implementation of one of the recommendations of the Process Evaluation of November, 1978.

III. Research Design and Methodology

Although initially funded in September, 1977, the program did not become operational until January, 1978. This evaluation provides an initial assessment of how successful the program has been in meeting its two primary goals of reducing truancy and arrest recidivism among participants. Additionally, a summary unit-cost analysis describes program costs.

The data were gathered primarily by the program staff from records of the Orleans Parish School Board and were subsequently verified by the evaluator to assess truancy reduction. Data secured from the New Orleans Police Department Juvenile Division were used to assess the incidence of arrests among participants. Finally, other information used in the evaluation resulted from program narratives, fiscal reports, and from interviews with program personnel.

While perhaps not the ideal measure of truancy reduction, a ratio of days absent to days present was used to assess school attendance of program participants before and after participation in the program. This measure was selected because it was not affected by the non-uniform program intake date of participants and because it was the best available indicator of improved attendance. However, when interpreting the amount of change, the reader is cautioned to remember that those references are to this ratio and sufficient follow-up time has not elapsed to more adequately measure truancy

reduction. It should be noted that there is currently no operational definition of truancy.

The measure used to assess the reduction of arrest recidivism was simply the change in the number of criminal arrests before and after entrance into the program. This measure should also be interpreted with caution as there is no control for time. The period before participation covers the participant's whole lifetime, while the period after entrance into the program is no longer than eighteen months.

As noted earlier, the program was designed to serve 150 students per year. Due to the slow start-up, one whole semester passed before any students were actually received and serviced. Thus, the program was operational approximately only one and a half school years. The intake numbers are, thereby, affected accordingly.

IV. Findings

A. General

During the period January 1978-May 1979, the program provided services to 151 students. As it was designed to serve 150 participants per year and was operational for a year and a half, at least 225 students should have participated. The 151 participants served by the program represented 67.1% of the 225 which the program was expected to serve or, just over 50% of the 300 expected had the program been operational the full two years.

As indicated by Table 1, eighty-one (54%) of the participants were male and seventy (46%) were female. The average age of students at the time of intake was fourteen years and all participants were black.

Table 1

Age	Sex		Total	% of Total
	Male	Female		
11	1	0	1	0.7
12-13	19	27	46	30.9
14-15	53	37	90	60.4
16-17	6	5	11	7.4
18	0	1	1	0.7
Total	79	70	149 ^a	100.1 ^b

^aTotal N = 151. Age was missing for two cases, both male.

^bTotal does not add to 100.0 due to rounding errors.

Table 2 provides monthly intake data. As evidenced by this Table, some intake peaks coincide with the early part of semesters, with the heaviest intake in January and February, 1978; July, 1978; and January, 1979. The average monthly participant intake was nine, excluding May, 1979.

Table 2
Monthly Intake

Month/Year	Number	%
Jan-78	28	18.5%
Feb-78	18	11.9%
Mar-78	9	6.0%
Apr-78	1	0.7%
May-78	0	0.0%
Jun-78	0	0.0%
Jul-78	32	21.2%
Aug-78	3	2.0%
Sep-78	5	3.3%
Oct-78	9	6.0%
Nov-78	1	0.7%
Dec-78	5	3.3%
Jan-79	16	10.6%
Feb-79	13	8.6%
Mar-79	7	4.6%
Apr-79	4	2.6%
May-79	0	0.0%
Total	151	100.0%

B. Truancy

The fact that all participants were truants was sufficient for compliance with the grant stipulation that 51% of the participants have contact with the juvenile system. However, attendance data were available for ninety-five (62.9%) of the participants. The others had either moved, transferred to another school, or had been in the program an insufficient length of time for inclusion. Of those

for whom data were available, fourteen (14.7%) had a higher ratio of days absent to days present after entrance into the program, while eighty-one (85.3%) had improved attendance. As indicated by Table 3, the truancy ratio for all ninety-five students changed approximately 49% in the direction of reduced truancy, approaching the goal of the 50% reduction stated in the grant application.

Table 3

Change in Truancy Ratio^a Before and After Intake

	N	Percent Change
Successful	81	- 66.6% ^b
Unsuccessful	14	+ 55.8% ^c
Total	95	- 48.6% ^d

^aTruancy Ratio = $\frac{\text{Days Absent}}{\text{Days Present}}$

^bThis percentage reflects improved attendance.

^cThis percentage reflects increased absences.

^dOverall, the truancy ratios changed in a favorable direction.

C. Arrest Recidivism

A search of the files at the New Orleans Police Department Juvenile Division revealed that sixty-six students at the Center had arrest records. Of these, four females had

status offenses only which had occurred before participation. One male had a single traffic offense which occurred after intake into the program. The remaining sixty-one students had criminal offenses as indicated by Table 4.

Table 4

Distribution of Arrests^a

N = 61

Number of Arrests Before

		0	1	2	3	4	5 or more	Total
Number of Arrests After	0		18	8	4	1		31
	1	6	2	3	2		1	14
	2	3	2	2	1			8
	3			2		1		3
	4		2				1	3
	5	1			1			2
Total		10	24	15	8	2	2	61

^aThe number in each cell of the table represents the number of people with "before" arrests corresponding to the column number and "after" arrests corresponding to the row number. For example, in the first row, second column, eighteen people had one arrest before and none after.

Table 5 indicates the nature of the offense and sex of the offender. As indicated by the total number of offenses, there was a 39.6% decrease in total arrests of participants after program participation. While less than the 50% reduction anticipated in the grant application, it represents a sizeable decrease.

However, and perhaps more importantly, when the percent change in the number of arrests before and after was

Table 5

Specific Offenses (By Sex) Before and After Intake

Offense	Before		After	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Attempted Murder			2	
Rape	3		1	
Armed Robbery	1		5	
Pursesnatching	3		5	
Burglary	22		1	
Shoplifting	17	13	5	2
Other Theft	11		9	
Auto Theft	3		3	
Possession/ Stolen Property	4		3	
Assault	1	1		1
Battery	2	1	5	1
Kidnapping			1	
Drug Possession			1	
Aggravated Crime Against Nature	1			
Loitering/ Vagrancy	3		1	
Trespassing	9		12	
Disturbing the Peace	4	1	3	
Truancy	1			
Total ^a	85	16	57	4

^aThe total number of offenses before (male and female) was 101 while total after was 61. This represents a 39.6% reduction in number of offenses.

calculated for each of the sixty-one students with criminal records, the average change was 16.4% less arrests, considerably below the goal of a 50% reduction. Because the pre-program arrest period includes the entire lifetime of the participant and the post-program arrest period is of considerably less duration, this average percent change must be interpreted cautiously. The final evaluation will control for time in order to more adequately assess programmatic impact on arrest recidivism.

D. Unit Cost

JJDP grants in the amount of \$121,125.00 and cash matches totaling \$13,458.00 enabled the Center to operate between September 1, 1977, and May 31, 1979 (a total of 637 days.) The total, \$134,583.00, represents a cost of slightly over \$211.00 per day. However, while some staff had been hired, the program did not find a location and become fully operational until January 1, 1978. That effectively left only 516 operational days and, using that figure, the cost per day was approximately \$261.00.

With 151 students enrolled at the Center during that time, the cost per participant was about \$891.00, without regard for length of time in the program. Had the program served the 225 students anticipated, the cost per participant would have been just over \$598.00.

A number of services (e.g., counseling, tutoring, referrals, etc.) were offered to participants. During the operational period, 7,450 such individualized service contacts³ were provided the 151 students, representing an average of forty-nine contacts per student. Thus, the average cost per contact was approximately \$18.00. To again make the comparison with the number of students' originally anticipated (i.e., 225) while assuming the average number of contacts would have been the same (i.e., forty-nine), the

³Source: Statistical Report from the Student Action Center.

average cost per contact would have been just over \$12.00. In view of the fact that the service contacts are variable requiring differing amounts of time, these cost per contact figures appear excessive.

V. Summary and Recommendations

Summary

The Student Action Center was implemented as an experimental program providing intervention designed to reduce truant behavior, with the assumption that whatever delinquent behavior (as measured by offense/arrest recidivism) might be associated with truant behavior would be similarly affected. The measures used in this evaluation, given their qualifications as well as the qualifications of the data, suggest that the efforts of the program are reducing truancy but having little effect on arrest recidivism. However, sufficient time has not elapsed to generate data to assess the assumption that reduction of truant behavior leads to lowered arrest recidivism.

The preparation of this evaluation raised a number of questions which will be addressed in the final impact evaluation. Among these are the following:

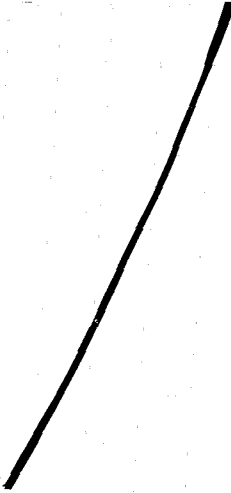
- (1) What are the "root causes" of truant behavior? Is the Center really identifying the cause of truancy and, if so, how are these causes serviced?
- (2) What are the typical problem areas involved in re-entry into school?
- (3) What is the significance of the contract signed by participants before re-entry? How is the contract followed-up?

As well as the above questions, several additional items requiring analysis will be addressed in the final impact evaluation, including:

- (1) Analysis of length of time in the program as related to program goals.
- (2) Analysis of the variances in monthly intake.
- (3) Analysis of arrest statistics in terms of crime seriousness.
- (4) Analysis of types of services rendered as well as what determines which services are offered.

Recommendations

As the Center has apparently been able to effect truancy reduction among the majority of the participants, the primary recommendation is that intake be increased so that more students may be serviced. Secondly, it is recommended that the Center (or the School Board) establish an operational definition of truancy and then maintain the necessary records on each participant to measure it. Finally, since the reduction of arrest recidivism was minimal, it is important that the final impact evaluation explore, if not test, the assumption that the reduction of truant behavior leads to lowered arrest recidivism.



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